

# main course

introducing

## 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

'encounters in Mark's Gospel' brings you suggestions for a series of up to fifteen small-group conversations based on particular stories in Mark's Gospel. These conversations all share the same basic shape. They aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

### The conversations on offer...

We'd love your group to have fascinating, bonding, explorative, enlightening and confidence-building conversations about all fifteen of the following stories from Mark's Gospel; but y'all must decide for yourselves which and how many of them you wish to try.

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Mark 1.9-11  | Jesus and the voice from heaven |
| 2. Mark 1.16-20   | Jesus and the fishermen         |
| 3. Mark 1.40-45   | Jesus and the (social) leper    |
| 4. Mark 3.19-21 & 31-35   | Jesus and his family            |
| 5. Mark 5.25-34   | Jesus and a nameless woman      |
| 6. Mark 7.24-30   | Jesus and a Gentile woman       |
| 7. Mark 8.22-26   | Jesus and a blind man           |
| 8. Mark 8.27-38   | Jesus and the clever disciple   |
| 9. Mark 10.13-16  | Jesus and the children          |
| 10. Mark 10.32-45   | Jesus and the loaded question   |
| 11. Mark 12.41-44   | Jesus and the sacrificial widow |
| 12. Mark 14.3-9   | Jesus and a shameless woman     |
| 13. Mark 14.32-42   | Jesus and the moment of truth   |
| 14. Mark 14.53-65   | Jesus and the powers that be    |
| 15. Mark 16.1-8   | Women at an empty tomb          |
| 16. Hearing the whole story – a complete performance of Mark's Gospel |                                 |

# main course

introducing

## 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

The basic structure of each of these conversations:

1. The conversation begins and ends with a focus on **'us and our understanding'**
2. We then provide two bits of carefully-selected **"Extra Insights"** from biblical scholars:
  - 2A. a bit about how this story fits within **Mark's whole-Gospel story**
  - 2B. a bit about the social background of the story within **Jesus' world**
3. At the heart of each conversation is an **'encounter triangle'** of three questions to help explore the story and the ways we make sense of it
4. Each conversation also has a possible **song** to round things off
5. Each conversation can be run in various ways with lots, little or no **paperwork**

Every one of these conversations is focussed on a particular encounter between Jesus and someone he meets. You and your group are asked to watch this Jesus-encounter very carefully. Then you discuss together what Jesus and whoever he met might have learned from their meeting. In that way, watching 2,000 years later, your group has its own shared encounter with that original meeting – you, too, share an **'encounter in Mark's Gospel'**.

If you'd like to know more about what is being offered and why, do read on, below...

### 1 – Making sure it's your conversation...

All of these conversations follow the basic pattern of **contextual Bible study** developed by Gerald West and others in Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa. This approach deliberately starts and finishes with a focus on the ideas of the group that is sharing the conversation. You'll be invited to begin with an open question (to which there are no 'right' answers)..... **'What is this story about?'** – a chance for your group to get talking about the story by sharing and comparing your initial reactions to it.

The final two questions are also focused on your local 21<sup>st</sup> Century study group and the world you share ... **'In what ways does this story speak to us today?'** and **'What are we going to do differently now?'**.

In between there's an invitation to share in a careful exploration of one story in Mark's Gospel, using some "Extra Insights" and an "Encounter Triangle" to help make connections between the Gospel story and your own life stories – *more details below...*

### 2A – EXTRA INSIGHTS, part one – Mark's whole-Gospel story...

One of the wonders of Mark's Gospel is the way in which each individual story (which presumably had a life of its own before Mark collected them all together) also works as an integrated part of the 'Big' story of Jesus that this whole Gospel tells. Sometimes that

# main course

## introducing

### 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

means we can learn a lot about a story from looking at the ones Mark put before and after it. Other times it means there's a lot to learn from stopping and thinking about where in the flow of Mark's story this story occurs. We'll provide appropriate extra insights to help your group make sense of the story you're exploring.

#### 2B – EXTRA INSIGHTS, part two – the social background...

If we are to make reasonable connections between the world as we know it and the social world that lies behind our Gospel story, it helps to know a bit more about how society worked in those days and what sorts of things 'everyone' knew then. We'll provide extra insights for each story that should help your group determine 'what is going on here' – that should allow you to make better connections between the story's world and our world.

#### 3 - ENCOUNTER TRIANGLES...

This is a simple idea that we hope will help people to explore each particular Gospel story and connect it with their own stories. If we imagine we are working with a story about Peter and Jesus, then we have a triangle of possible encounters with Peter, Jesus and ourselves at the three corners. Encounter Triangles invite us to try standing at each corner in turn, asking a question from each viewpoint:

- **PETER'S CORNER:** What does **Peter** learn from his encounter with **Jesus**?
  - *with 'teasing-out' sub-questions... What did **Peter** bring to the encounter? What did **Peter** find in the encounter? What did **Peter** take away from it?*
- **JESUS' CORNER:** What does **Jesus** learn from his encounter with **Peter**?
  - *with 'teasing-out' sub-questions... What did **Jesus** bring to the encounter? What did **Jesus** find in the encounter? What did **Jesus** take away from it?*
- **OUR CORNER:** What do **we** learn from watching **Jesus and Peter** in this encounter?
  - *with 'teasing-out' sub-questions... What previous understandings of this story do **we** bring to the encounter? What have **we** found there this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do **we** take away from watching this encounter together?*

#### 4 - A song for singing...

There may be places where the group would appreciate rounding things off with a song that picks up on the story they have just been considering. To allow for that, we've provided an optional song for the end of each conversation that's set to a well-know tune. If you are going to use the song, it's might be best to get someone to 'tum-te-tum' the first line or the whole tune before everyone launches-in unaccompanied. If you hand out slips of paper with the song words group members may well take them home as a reminder of the story they've shared.

# main course

## introducing

## 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

### 5 - Passing out papers

Some groups like to see the whole text of whatever is provided for the study. Other groups would be overwhelmed by that and simply want to talk. Yet other groups would be happy to have specific handouts when they help. These studies are designed to work with any one of three basic paper-passing strategies (*or other combinations if you can think of them*):

- **Paper Free Conversations** – if, say, two of you introduce the passage by storytelling, share some ideas from the “Extra Insights” sections verbally and don’t bother with the song, then the whole study can be done verbally, without involving any paper or reading by the rest of the group.
- **Partly-paper-supported Conversation** - if those preparing the session provide the text from Mark on a handout (or get people to use Bibles) you can work conversationally around the set questions, providing the “Extra Insights” pages and the final song as paper handouts, and otherwise just keep the group talking.
- **Paper-rich study groups** – if you have people who are happy to download materials you can invite them to download the whole study or you can print off complete sets of notes from the website and hand them out to everyone in the group.

Basically, work the way that seems best for your group.

### Things left undecided in what we provide...

Even if you are trying to follow the ideas on offer and adapt them to your local circumstances, there’s still a lot of issues that are left undecided that are a crucial part of enabling your group to engage in the conversations.

- **venue, atmosphere and catering** – the venue and the catering can have a huge effect on the atmosphere, either enabling or restricting people’s freedom to engage in the conversation. Local possibilities and options should be carefully considered. There’s no reason why these conversations could not take place in a local café, but equally your group may best meet in someone’s home or the lounge at a sheltered housing complex, or a room at church. Catering will be a factor in deciding venue. Do you want to meet round a meal table? Where can you get chocolate cake? Is it best to stick with a cuppa? Answers to all these questions must be local answers.
- **recruitment and belonging** – you may choose to work with an existing group or recruit a group specially. How you sell the idea is a local decision. As each conversation is free-standing it may be possible to recruit more people as you go along, but think through issues of group dynamics and whether a growing group would change the conversations or might need splitting into sub-groups.
- **working with the text of the story** – each suggested conversation is focussed on a particular passage from Mark’s Gospel. How you introduce that text is also a local decision. In some places everyone will be happy working with their own Bible or a provided ‘church’ Bible, in other places it might be better to give people a handout with the selected story on it (perhaps in larger print). In some settings it might be better to introduce the story by getting everyone to try remembering it together, or

# main course

## introducing

### 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

by getting a good storyteller to tell it or read it out. Some groups may respond best to an entirely oral approach. Knowing your group, you can work out what's best.

- **prayer and worship** – in some settings it would seem quite wrong to talk about a Bible story without starting in prayer; for other groups, particularly where some members are not from churchy backgrounds, opening prayer might feel totally inappropriate. Deciding how to weave in worship and prayer and whether to do it at all must be a local decision.
- **leading and enabling** – the way in which the group is formed and how it's led and enabled to share its conversations is entirely a local decision. However we'd urge you to work with 3 key ideas in deciding how the group should be led and enabled.
  - Firstly, try to make the decisions about what is done in the group as **democratic and inclusive** as possible – it helps encourage a shared sense of ownership, which should lead to more confident participation by all.
  - Secondly, preparation and enabling of a particular session is usually **better shared between two people** than done by one – then, whilst one is asking questions the other is able to spot imbalances in answering or someone's body language of uneasiness and help to draw them in; it also helps with preparation and reflection if you have at least two of you to talk about it.
  - Thirdly, these conversations have been deliberately designed to minimise **the risk of "Expert Takeover"** – the task of leading is entirely focussed on getting the group members to share what they think, apart from the specific information in the two "Extra Insights" sections. This is about shared conversation to explore the story, not about Bible experts putting everyone else right or impressing everyone with their knowledge. If there's any danger of this in your group be particularly careful to contract with the whole group that Bible knowledge is only to be shared in the 'Extra Insights' sections.
- **keeping the process on track** – as your group is a unique mix of real people you will need to devise your own local strategies for avoiding fascinating sidetracks or domination of the conversation by one or two voices. It's probably worth enablers of a particular session considering strategies before they start and also reflecting on 'successes' and 'failures' and 'future options' after their session. Practical strategies we have found helpful include:
  - At the start, get everyone to agree to listen, collaborate & stick to the task.
  - Be ready to remind people, when necessary, of what they've agreed
  - Be ready with, *'Thanks, but we'll deal with this later, when we get to...'*
- **follow-up and futures** – as the series progresses (should you choose to try more than one conversation) you and your group need to think about what happens next. Will the group develop into a regular (or irregular) event? What would make sense as a follow-up? What do those taking part want? One 'rounding off' suggestion that might work for your group is sharing an out-loud reading of the whole of Mark's Gospel. It takes less than two hours and feels like a movie – it can be very exciting. We suggest a way of organising this in **'encounters in Mark's Gospel - sixteen'**.

# main course

introducing

## 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'

### Sources of information and ideas on Mark's Gospel that we found helpful:

Fisher, Leith (2003) *Will you follow me? – exploring the Gospel of Mark*, Edinburgh: Scottish Christian Press

France, R. T. (2002) *The Gospel of Mark (NIGTC)*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press

Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers (2000) *In the company of Jesus – characters in Mark's Gospel*, Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press

Malina, Bruce & Rohrbaugh, Richard (2003) *Social Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Press

Miller, Susan (2004) *Women in Mark's Gospel*, London: T&T Clark International

Moloney, Francis J. (2002) *The Gospel of Mark – a commentary*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson

Myers, Ched (1988, Anniversary edition 2008) *Binding the Strong Man – a political reading of Mark's story of Jesus*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books

Proctor, John (2005) *Mark's Jesus – Grove Booklet B37*, Cambridge: Grove Books

Wright, Tom (2001) *Mark for everyone*, London: SPCK

### Acknowledgements:

The core ideas of contextual Bible study as used in these materials come from Gerald West, notably in his book *The Academy of the Poor*, published by Sheffield Academic Press in 1999 and later republished by Cluster Press of Pietermaritzburg – see especially chapter 6.

A worked example of the contextual approach, using the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12.40-45, can be found in a web article, 'Structural Sin: a South African Perspective' by Gerald West at:

<http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=113>

A whole range of other related materials using contextual approaches to Bible study can also be found on the Ujamaa Centre website:

<http://www.sorat.ukzn.ac.za/ujamaa/default.htm>

If you wish further ideas about working with groups to help them assemble a remembered version of the story, try Janet Lees' book *Word of Mouth – using the remembered Bible for building community*, published in Glasgow in 2007 by Wild Goose Publications.

The song words offered at the end of each study are by John M. Campbell, a URC minister. He is very happy for you to reproduce them for singing; simply note his name on the page.